

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE BEGUILING OF BAGOAS

THAT night Noot my master came to bid farewell to me.

"I go north as I have been commanded—as to how the command came, let that be—hoping thereby to preserve the temples of our worship and those who serve in them. I know not if I shall return, or when, and therefore, Daughter of my spirit, it grieves me to part from you in these troublous times. Yet the command said that you must not accompany me but bide here. For your comfort, learn two things: first, that no harm shall come to you, as I have told you before; and secondly, though that hour be far away, even in the flesh we shall meet again. Wait then till my word comes to you."

I bowed my head in obedience and asked whether he was unattended.

"Nay, Daughter," he answered. "I take with me certain of our fellowship, and among them that Greek Kallikrates who has asked leave to accompany me. Being a man of war, as you have seen, he may perchance prove of service upon such a mission. How he learned that I was going I cannot say," he added, looking at me curiously.

"I told him. Ask no more, Master."

"There is little need, I think," he answered, smiling. "It may please you to learn," he added bitterly, "that the traitor who was Pharaoh, flies up Nile to-morrow ere the dawn. Already they lade



his ship with the chests of Egypt's treasure, many of them, that should have gone to pay his soldiers and strengthen his allies."

"May the counting of them comfort him in his honourable exile among the Ethiopians! Yet, my Master, I think that he will need to count quickly, unless it pleased the gods to send a false vision to me when I prophesied in the palace yonder, ere this shameless Nectanebes gave the Daughter of Isis to Tenes the Sidonian."

"If so, Ayesha, the gods sent a false vision to me also. How will he face them, I wonder, with the blood of Egypt on his hands, and with what voice will he tell them of their desecrated shrines?"

"I know not, Master, yet it was written that because of her apostasies and sins Egypt must fall. Can the gods, then, be wroth with their own instrument?"

Noot pondered awhile, shaking his head, then answered,

"Go ask that question of the Sphinx who sits yonder in the sand by the pyramids of the ancient kings brooding, as the legend says, over the secrets of earth and heaven. Or," he added slowly, "when your own days are done, Ayesha, ask it of your soul. Perchance then some god will make clear the riddle of the world below, but here on earth it cannot be answered, since he who could read it would know all things and be himself a god. Sin must come, and to sin, sinners are necessary. But to what sin is necessary, I do not know, unless it be that from it good is born at last. At least the sinner can plead that he is but an arrow on the bow of Destiny and that the arrow must fly where the shooter aims, even though it drinks innocent blood, widows women, and makes children fatherless."



"Mayhap, my Master, it will be answered to this arrow that it fashioned itself to deal out death; that it grew the wood and forged the barb and bound upon its shaft the feathers of desire; which wood, had it chosen otherwise, here or elsewhere might have flourished—a tree bearing fruits—or as seasoned wood, shaped itself to be a staff to lean upon or a rod of justice in the hands of kings."

"You are wise, Ayesha, nor have I instructed you in vain," he replied with a gentle smile. "Yet I repeat, when for the last time you watch the sun sink and your soul prepares to follow it over the edge of the world, then again propound to it this riddle and hear the answer of that invisible Sphinx which broods in the heaven above, on the earth below, and in the breast of every child it bears."

Thus he spoke and waved his hand, making an end of that debate. Nor have I ever forgotten it, or his words, and now when sometimes I feel or hope soon I, even I, the half-immortal, may see the sun sink for the last time, once more, as Noot commanded, I ask this riddle of the Sphinx that broods within my instructed spirit, and wait its answer. For alas and alas! how am I better than Nectanebes? He betrayed the gods. Have I not betrayed the gods who were nearer to me than ever they came to his coarse and gluttonous soul? He shed blood to satisfy his rage and lust. Have I not shed blood and shall I not perchance shed more of it before all is done, when my unconquerable appetites are on me and there is a dear prize that I would win? He fled with the treasures of Egypt to waste them in the desert sand. Have I not fled with the treasures that were given me—with the jewelled crowns of my wisdom, with the golden talents of my heaped-up learning, with the alabaster



vessel of my beauty, with the perfumes of my power and my eloquence—that drilled, ordered, and massed together, and added to the greatest gift of all, my length of undying days, might have reformed the world and led it into peace?

Have I, Ayesha, not fled with all these countless splendours clasped upon my breast, and buried them in the wilderness, as did Nectanebes with Egypt's wealth, before the barbarians slew him? Have I not done these things because of a great desire and because, robbed of that desire, the world I should have guided was gall to my tongue and gravel to my teeth? Yet was I to blame? Was not that blind man I loved to blame who could not see with his darkened, fleshly eyes the glory that lay within his grasp and thus stirred my soul to madness? Was not the woman to blame also who darkened those eyes of his by arts the evil gods had given her?

Oh! I know not. Perchance they too can put up a tale before the Judgment Seat which I shall find it hard to answer, for they too are as they were made, or as they made themselves, shaping their own arrows from the wood of circumstance that grew I know not where. And now my desire has drawn near to me again; it gleams, a glittering fruit, upon the Tree of Life, and I stretch out my hand to pluck it. Yes, I stand on tiptoe and almost reach it with my finger-tips. Yet what if it prove a corruption? What if it crumble into dust, rotted by the great sun of my spirit, withered at the fingering of my undying hand?

Oh! my lord hunts upon the mountain after the fashion of men, and Atene, once named Amenartas, sits in her dark beauty in the City of the Plains and, as aforetime, plots my ruin and her fleshly theft. Who knows the end? But there within my soul



broods the Sphinx smiling its immortal smile and to it soon or late I must put that question to which Noot, the holy and half divine, could give no answer—or would not if he could.

“What of the royal Princess, Amenartas?” I asked. “Know, Master, that I grow weary of this woman.”

“Aye, Daughter, these temple courts are wide, but not wide enough for both of you. Take comfort, she sails to-morrow.”

“North?” I asked.

“Nay, south with her father, Nectanebes. Or so she tells me, saying that his fortune shall be her own and that together they will reign or fall.”

“It is well,” I answered.

Then we talked of humble matters that had to do with the shrine of the goddess and of the hiding away of her treasures lest the Persians should take them. When all was finished, Noot rose, blessed me, calling on the Powers above to protect me, and went his ways in the ship *Hapi* which he had purchased to bring it to my aid at Sidon, nor did I guess that for years I should see him no more. Yet I think he knew it well.

Like a mighty river in its flood the Persian hosts poured down on Memphis. As such a torrent sweeps away the village and the humble homestead, drowns the cattle, twists out the palm trees by their roots, covers the corn with slime, floods cities, palaces, and temples, chokes the breath from their inhabitants and strews the kind earth with the corpses of those that tilled it, so did Ochus and his barbarians to Egypt. Rapine and massacre, flames of fire and misery marked their path. Men were



butchered by the thousand, the aged and women who were no longer fair were driven into the desert to starve. Yes, it was the sport of those Persians to drive them like game to where there was no water, and then watch them die of thirst beneath the burning sun. Only the young women were spared to be concubines or slaves, and the flower of the children to be put to vile purposes. The cities and the temples were pillaged, their citizens tortured to drag from them the secret of the hiding-places of treasure, the priests were forced to sacrifice to the god of fire and to spit upon their own or die, the priestesses were burned or defiled, or both.

So pitiful was the case of Egypt that although I knew that by her sins and faithlessness she had brought these woes upon herself, I who by my work at Sidon had become one of the appointed ministers of her destruction, my heart wept for her and I prayed the avenging gods to hold their hands. Also I prayed them to give Ochus to drink of his own cup and to make of me the butler who mixed his wine. Nor did I pray in vain.

Thus the red Ochus came at length to Memphis, the white-walled city, the ancient, the holy, and filled its streets with horror, till they were spread thick with dead and one wail of woe went up to heaven. Yet he did not burn the place, perchance because our prayers availed and the gods relented, perchance because he wished to keep it to be the seat of his majesty. Only here as elsewhere he sacked the temples and wrought sacrilege.

From the pylon top of the temple of Isis that overlooked the courts of that of Ptah and the gilded stable of the bull Apis, with my own eyes I saw the Persians, for in this business the Greeks would have no hand, drag out the sacred beast whom they held



to be a god of the Egyptians, though in truth he was but the emblem of the god, or rather of the generating power that is in Nature, and butcher it with jeers and mockery. More, their scullions came and cooked the sacred flesh after which, at tables spread in the inner court, Ochus and his captains ate it, forcing the priests of Ptah to "taste of their own god" and to drink of the liquor in which it had been seethed. They were cowards, those priests, or surely they would have found means to mix the broth with poison.

After the feast, when all the revellers were drunk with wine, a great jackass was brought and, the statue of the god having been thrown out of it, was stabled in the sanctuary.

Such were some of the things that were done in Memphis and indeed throughout Egypt, for as Apis was served, so was the holy ram of Mendes. Moreover, other things were done too shameful to record.

Now all this while I sat in the temple of Isis awaiting what might befall. I will not say that I was unafraid, because I was afraid. Yet within me was that proud spirit which forbade me to show my fear. Moreover, within me also burned a certain fire of faith whereof the light was my guide in the darkness of despair. The holy Noot, my Master, had told me that I and those with me should take no harm, and I would not doubt my Master. Moreover, when I prayed at night, a voice from heaven speaking in my heart seemed to command me to be brave, since there fought for me and mine those whom I could not see.

So there I sat quite alone with none to counsel me and none to help me, giving courage as best I could to those poor priests and priestesses, my fellow servants of the goddess. The worship of the temple



went on as before, each morn the statue of the Mother was decked and dressed, the perfumes were poured, the offerings were made, the processions wound round the courts preceded by the singers and the shakers of the *sistrum*, while at night the holy hymns were chanted to the stars.

The Persians came to know of these things and gathered at the gates, amazed.

"Who are these," they asked, "who have no fear?"

But we answered nothing though death stared us in the face.

The matter reached the ears of Ochus and stirred his wonder, so that in the end he came in person to visit the temple. I received him in the great hall, veiled and seated in a chair of state that was set at the foot of a statue of the goddess. With him were sundry of his great lords dressed in silks and perfumed, also the general Mentor whom I had known at Sidon where he played traitor, deserting with his Greeks to the Persians. Further there was present Bagoas the eunuch and first councillor of the King of kings, who commanded his army also; like all these unfortunates, a fat, shrill-voiced man with a smooth and furtive manner, who waved his long hands to and fro when he spoke.

Now this Bagoas was by birth Egyptian; so I had heard, and my first sight of him confirmed the tale. Yes, without doubt by birth he was an Egyptian of the small-boned, large-eyed, round-headed type that had descended from the ancient blood, as I knew by the statues of many that I have seen taken from the earliest tombs before it became the custom to embalm the dead. I noted this, and at once a thought came to me.

Would an Egyptian desire to see the sanctuary of



Isis and her priests desecrated and destroyed? Perchance he did not worship Ptah or Apis, or other of the gods, but all born upon the Nile venerated Mother Isis, the Queen of Heaven, and bowed to her sovereignty. That was a faith which where'er they wandered and upon whatever altars they burned incense, they never could forget, because through a hundred generations it came down to them with their blood. Yet who knew? This Bagoas, it was said, was a cunning fellow steeped in murder, who from his crimes had reaped a rich reward, and such an one, looking only to his day of glory, might forget even Isis and the wrath to come.

Ochus, loose-lipped, cruel-faced, and weary-eyed, wearing a look of pride that yet was full of haunting terrors, such as are ever the companions of murderers who know that in a day unborn surely themselves they will be murdered, stood before me. I, rising from my chair, made obeisance to the King of kings—and had he but known it, cast the curse of Isis at him from beneath my veil.

“What is this?” he asked, speaking in Greek, in the thick voice of one who has drunk well at the feast, and pointing at me with his sceptre. “Is it one of those wrapped bodies that we drag from the tombs, such as we used for the cooking of the god Apis, broiling him with his own worshippers? Nay, for it moves and talks and seems to have the shape of woman. Bagoas, strip that veiled thing naked, that we may see whether it be a woman, and if so, of what favour.”

Now when I, Ayesha, heard this, at once all my courage came back to me, as ever it does when peril gets me by the throat. At once I laid my plan, which was short and simple.

If that eunuch so much as advanced to lay a



finger on me, I would draw the knife that hung to my girdle, the curved, razor-edged Arab knife that had been my father's, and thrusting him aside, I would spring past him and strike it through the heart of yonder King of kings, sending him to sum up his account with Isis. Then if there were time, I would serve Bagoas in the same way, and afterward, if must be, use the knife upon myself. Better thus than that I should be shamed before these barbarians.

I spoke no word and my face was hid, yet I think that out of my soul sprang something which warned these two of their danger. Or perchance it was my guardian spirit that warned them. At the least Bagoas went down upon his knees and bowed till his forehead touched the ground.

"O King of kings," he said, "I pray thee command not thy slave to do this deed. Yonder lady is the prophetess of Isis, Queen of all gods, Queen of Heaven and Earth, and to touch her with an unhallowed hand is a sacrilege that brings death in this world and in that to come everlasting torment."

Now Ochus laughed brutally, then turned and asked,

"What do you say, Mentor, who are a Greek and know no more of the gods of Egypt than I do? Is there any reason why we should not strip this veiled priestess and discover what she is like beneath those wrappings?"

Now Mentor rubbed his brow and answered,

"Since I am asked, O King of kings, one does come into my mind. Do you remember Tenes, King of the Sidonians? He took this same prophetess as a gift from Nectanebes, and also wished to strip her in his fashion. Well, Tenes came to a very bad end, and so did Nectanebes who gave her to



him, or is in the way of it. Therefore, O King of kings, were I in your place, I should advise that she remain veiled, who perhaps after all is but an ugly old woman. I have known little of Isis, still she is a goddess with a great name and perchance it is scarcely worth while to risk her wrath to look at the wrinkled flesh of an ugly old woman. One never knows, O King of kings, and I have seen so much of it of late that I come to learn that death, with the curse of Heaven thrown in, is a bad business."

Thus spoke Mentor in his bluff, rambling, soldier talk, that yet was so full of Grecian cunning, and Ochus, appearing suddenly to grow sober, listened to him.

"I seem to remember," Ochus said, "that this same priestess served me well yonder at Sidon, giving the Phœnician dog, Tenes, counsel that led him down to ruin. So at least the tale runs. Therefore, not because of the Egyptian goddess whom I despise," and he spat on the statue of Isis, an act at which I saw Bagoas shiver, "or for the reasons that you fools give, but because by design or chance, I know not which, she served me well at Sidon, let her continue to wear her veil. I command also that this temple, which is beautiful in its fashion, shall not be burned or harmed, and that those who serve it may continue to dwell there and carry on their mad worship as it pleases them, provided that they stay within its walls and do not attempt to stir up the people by pageantry in the streets. In token thereof I stretch out my sceptre," and he held the ivory-headed wand he carried toward me.

Bagoas whispered to me that I must touch it, so I thrust my arm between the folds of my veil and did so, though next instant I remembered that it



would have been wiser to grasp the wand from beneath the veil.

At once Ochus noted the beauty of that arm and exclaimed with a laugh,

"By the holy fire! yonder hand and wrist are not those of an ugly old woman, such as was spoken of by you slaves, but rather those of one who is still young and fair. Had I seen them but a moment gone, surely she should have been stripped. Indeed——"

"I have touched the sceptre of the Great King," I broke in coldly. "Once the sceptre has been touched the decree of the Great King may not be altered."

"Wise also," said Ochus, "for she knows our Persian laws. Well, she is right. The sceptre has been touched and what has been said cannot be changed. See now, all of you who are ignorant, how good a shield is wisdom. Come, Mentor, let us be going to make sport with those young priestesses of Ammon who, not being wise, but only pretty, await us in the palace. It will be a merry night. Bagoas, bide you here, lest you should be shocked," and he laughed brutally, "also to inquire whether this heavenly harlot called Isis decks herself with jewels, for if so, as to them I swore no oath. Farewell, Priestess. Continue to be wise and to wear a veil, because if the rest of you is as shapely as your hand, who knows but that some night when wine has drowned all promises, I, or others, might cause you to be stripped at last."

Then he turned and went, followed by his foul company. Only Bagoas remained behind as he had been bidden.

When the doors had closed and by the shouts from without the walls I knew that the Persians



were gone, I said to Bagoas, who was alone with me in the place,

"Tell me, Egyptian, cradled beneath the wings of Isis, are you not afraid?" and I turned my head, glancing at the vile stain upon the alabaster statue.

"Aye, Prophetess," he answered, "I am afraid, as much afraid as you were but now."

"Fool!" I mocked back at him, "I was not afraid. Ere ever a hand had been laid upon me by you, you would have been dead, and that king whom you serve would have been dead also—ask me not how—and by now your souls would be writhing beneath the hooks of the Tormentors of the Under-world. Have you not heard of the curse of Isis, Eunuch, and do you think that your pomp and power can protect you from her swift sword? Now, *now*, should I but breathe one prayer to her, she can slay you if she wills."

He quaked, he fell upon his knees; yes, this murderer of kings fell upon his knees before me, one veiled woman in a shrine, imploring me to spare him and to protect him from the wrath of Heaven. For in his soul Bagoas was still Egyptian, and the blood of his forefathers who had worshipped Isis for a thousand years still ran strong in him. Moreover, he feared me, the priestess whose fame he knew, as he knew the fate of those who had offended me.

"Forgiveness! Protection! Methinks these must be most dearly bought, Bagoas. Are you one of those who have eaten the flesh of Apis and dragged the virgins of Ammon from their sanctuary? Are you one of those who have stabled an ass in the temple of Ptah, have burned the ancient fanes and have butchered the priests upon their altars?"

"Alas! I am," he said, beating his breast, "but not of my own will. What I did I must do, or die."



"It may be so. Make your own peace with those gods if you can. I have little to do with them who serve the Supreme Mother. But for her what atonement?" and again I glanced at the foul stain upon the alabaster of the image.

"That is what I need to be told. What atonement, Prophetess? I will swear that there are no jewels here; that the Mother is decked only with flowers and with perfumes. I will guard this shrine so that never again a Persian sets foot within its walls. I will cause any who offend you, Prophetess, to die secretly and at once. Is it enough?"

"Nay, nor by a hundredth part. You would spare the ceremonial trappings of the Mother, but where is vengeance upon him who defiled her with his spittle? You would protect the priestess, but where is vengeance upon him who would have stripped her stark to be his sport and that of his barbarians? If that is all you have to offer, Bagoas, take the Mother's curse and that of her Oracle, and get you down to hell." Here Bagoas lifted his hand as though to protect his head and began to protest, but without heeding him I went on,

"Hurry not, linger as long as you will upon the road. Deck yourself like a woman with brodered robes, perfume yourself with scents; set chains about your neck and jewels upon your fingers. Pander to the lusts you cannot share and take your pay in gold and provinces. Poison those you hate and from pure children wring out their lives, because these stand between you and the fruit of some new phantasy. Glut yourself with the swine's food of earth, swell yourself out with the marsh-gas of power, and then, Bagoas, die! die! one year, ten years, fifty years hence, and get you down to hell and look upon the awful eyes of the goddess you have shamed, of



her whom your forefathers worshipped from the beginning, and wait the coming of her priestess, that with every merciless particular she may lay the count against you from the pavement of the Judgment Hall."

"What, then, shall I do? What shall I do to save my soul? Know, Priestess, that I who am maimed in my body would save my soul, and that all these gauds you count are but gall and ashes to me; for having nought else to gain—being robbed of wives and children I needs must seek them and thus drug the spirit that is within me. Oh! it is something—being what I am, that I should feel the necks of all these great ones writhing beneath my foot. Yes," here his voice dropped to a whisper, "even that of the King of kings himself, who forgets that there were other Kings of kings before him. Tell me—what must I do?"

Secretly I drew the curved knife at my girdle; secretly and unwincing, unseen of him, I gashed my arm—oh! I cut deep, for I can see the mark to-day, though this fair flesh of mine once seemed to perish in the immortal fire, but to re-arise elsewhere. The blood from a severed vein leaped forth and stained my veil, a little mark at first which grew and grew, till it cried of murder. The man's eyes fastened themselves upon the prodigy, for so he thought it; then he asked,

"Blood! *Whose* blood?"

"Perchance that of the wounded goddess. Perchance that of a shamed priestess. What does it matter, Bagoas?"

"Blood," he went on, "for what does the blood ask?"

"Perchance it cries to Heaven for vengeance; perchance it demands to be washed away with other



blood, Bagoas. Who am I that I should interpret parables?"

Now he understood, and struggling from his knees, bent forward whispering in my ear. Yes, the priceless jewels that hung from his pointed golden cap jingled against my ear.

"I understand," he said, "and be sure it shall be done. But not yet. It cannot be yet. Still I swear that it shall be done when the hour is ripe. I hate him! I say that I hate him who while he showers gifts upon me with his hands, mocks me with his tongue, and who, when by my wit I win victories for him, jeers at the soldiers who are led by one who is neither man nor woman. Yes, I hate him who, knowing that I am of Egypt and in my heart a worshipper of the gods of Egypt, forces me to desecrate their shrines and to butcher those who serve them. Oh! I swear that it shall be done in its season."

"By what, O Bagoas?"

"By this, Prophetess," and seizing the dripping veil he rubbed that which stained it upon his lips and brow, "I swear by the blood of Isis, or of her Priestess and Oracle in whom Isis is, that I will neither rest nor stay till I bring Ochus Artaxerxes to his doom. Years may go by, but still I will bring him to his doom—at a price."

"What price?" I asked.

"That of absolution, Priestess, which is yours to give."

"Aye, it is mine to give or to withhold. Yet I give it not until Ochus lies dead, and by your hand. Then I call it down from Heaven—not before."

"At least protect me till that hour, O Daughter of the Queen of Heaven."

From the necklace I wore beneath my veil I loosed a certain charm of power, the secret symbol



of the Queen herself, worked cunningly in jasper, and known only to the initiate. This I breathed upon and blessed.

"Take it," I said, "and wear it on your heart. It shall protect you from all ills while your heart is true. But if once that heart turns from its purpose; ay! even if it fail to accomplish its purpose, then this holy token shall bring all ills upon you, here and hereafter, Bagoas. For then upon your doomed head shall fall the curse of the goddess that even now hangs suspended over it, as in the Grecian fable the sword of Damocles hangs by its single hair. Take it and be gone, to return no more till you come to tell me that Ochus Artaxerxes treads that same road upon which he has set so many feet."

Bagoas took the talisman and pressed it on his brow, as though it had been the very signet of the King of kings, and hid it away about him. Then he prostrated himself before me, who sat upon a greater throne, that of the Queen of queens, prostrated himself till his forehead touched the ground beneath my feet. Then rising, without another word, Bagoas withdrew himself with humble obeisances till he reached the doors where he vanished from my sight.

When the man had gone I, Ayesha, laughed aloud, I who had played a great game and won it.

Yes, I laughed aloud; then, having purified the statue of the goddess and burnt incense before it, I went upon my knees and returned my humble thanks to that just Heaven of which I was the minister.